

St. Therese of Lisieux: Her Inner Journey, part 3 God's Fatherhood

Therese had a wonderful father. He loved his wife through the horrors of her early life, when she was abused. This masculine love inspired his wife to overcome those difficulties, and to be an example of love to her children. Four of these nine children died young. These additional tragedies would have deranged a less loving husband and father, but Louis Martin emerged from these trials more loving and supportive. In this way, he modeled God the Father to his family. He and his wife have been acknowledged blessed as a result. No doubt, they will be canonized. Louis fathered his five girls, helping them through serious illnesses, and even abuse by a maid. Neighbors of the Martins were dysfunctional, and persecuted the family. But Louis led his family through this grave social trial. Perhaps his greatest challenge, and most glowing success, was to help his five daughters overcome their grief when their mother died.

Throughout all these sad experiences, Louis showed his children that love cures. Love kept them going when others collapsed. Love enlightened and enlivened their lives. The French call this happy vigor *élan*. It is primarily a masculine virtue. It looks life in the eye, sees disaster, but overcomes it. Louis responded to disaster with wit and courage, offering himself to protect his family. Poverty did not discourage him, though he and his wife both had to work full-time to make ends meet. He gave to others, by eating less. He loved to fish, and was good at it, so he could supplement the family income. But he also gave fish to the nuns who took care of repentant prostitutes. His fatherly care extended to all in need.

Jesus teaches us how to pray: "Our Father". This gets us off to the best start, since it reminds us in a simple way that God is the origin of all creatures, more a father to us than our biological father. Therese loved to pray, especially the Our Father. We can imagine her reflecting upon how her biological father showed her a lot of her heavenly father. Naturally, her heavenly father is more perfect, but the process is the same. Her heavenly father loved her more than her earthly father, but each loved her as much as each could. The first two words of this divinely inspired prayer remind us that we are God's children. This fits what Jesus taught his disciples: "Unless you be converted and become like little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of God", Mt 18:3. Therese saw how these pieces fit together into the love-dynamic that this world is. Her teaching, the "little way" followed naturally. In her feminine *élan*, Therese goes right to the loving heart of this world, without complicating love by masses of details. She acknowledges these details but does not bother with them.

Instead, she recognizes that God takes care of all details. She couldn't remember enough of them to take charge, so she relies upon God to manage them. Her little way begins with God's Fatherhood, enabling her to be His little child. God's Fatherhood floods creation with His love. We children respond to that initial act. We respond to love by love. Whenever we find a person who responds lovingly, we find an inspiring human being. Theresa was at ease because she realized that she did not have to understand everything. Instead, she relied upon love: "we know that to them that love God, all things work together unto good," Rom 8:28. Under His fatherly care, the little children flourish.

Therese emphasized little children because she remembered growing up doing things her way. So she emphasized the "little way": becoming a very little child. As Auman says: "a child can have to a certain extent an independent life of its own, calling upon its parent only in moments of need. A *little* child cannot do this: it has no life of its own; it is completely dependent on its parent, and so lives with perfect serenity and trust within that parent's protection. For St. Therese the word "little", which many would like to eliminate from her teaching, is the key to everything. She has made the Fatherhood of God live afresh for thousands of the faithful by calling us back from being children with a more or less independent life of our own, to become, as Our Lord would have us, *little* children, with no independent life at all, but depending absolutely on our heavenly Father. In so calling us to a fresh realization of the Fatherhood of God, she enables us to move through life with a serenity and confidence which is the prerogative of the childlike soul, for she makes known to us one of those secrets which God hides from the wise and prudent, and reveals only to little ones. The Bishop of Lisieux (in 1953) said that St. Therese shed a new light on one of the oldest, most fundamental Catholic doctrines: God is our Father.

"Just as a little child, looking upon its father, is not concerned as to whether he is rich or poor, plain or handsome, stupid or clever, but sees only one thing – *father* – so to little Therese as she looked at God, the fact that he was the Creator, the Omnipotent, or the Omnipresent, was purely secondary. To her he was, above all, Father. That God was really and truly her Father was to her the all-absorbing truth. This intimate realization of the Fatherhood of God is vividly expressed in a scene during her life in Carmel. One of the Sisters, wishing to speak with her, knocked at the door of her cell, and, on entering, found St. Therese sewing, with a rapt expression on her face. 'What are you thinking of?', asked the Sister. St. Therese replied: 'I was meditating on the Our Father. It is so wonderful to be able to call God "Our Father."' As she said it, tears came into her eyes. To many, this scene may appear emotional or even sentimental, whereas it is profound in its simplicity. It is we who are too complex in our sophistication to fathom its depths. It takes the simplicity of a saint to realize the Fatherhood of God so intimately as to be unable to get beyond the first two words of the *Pater Noster*," 11-12.

Therese plodded along her inner trail for miles without exceptional experiences. But we could assert that this experience is exceptional in its simplicity. We can all do it. We can all be absorbed by the wonder of God fathering us. But most of us do not pay attention. Of if we attend to God, we attend to His magnificence. He is so powerful, so complete, so perfect. But these notions keep Him away from us. All of them leave us cold, even uninterested, once we figure them out. The same is true of God's perfect truth, Goodness and Beauty. They are all so perfect that we can't approach them. These

aspects of God are true, so we do not deny them. These are the ways in which God is beyond us, so we call them transcendental aspects. God transcends us more than we can possibly understand, and we do not want to forget that.

God reaches out to us in His loving mercy. He touches us in our hearts. He shows that He is or directly present to us, without any barrier. He is intimate with us, but only if we allow Him in. He made us free, and respects our freedom, even if we misuse it to reject Him. So Jesus asks us to call God Father, to relate to him intimately because He cares for us as Fathers care for babies. "Father" emphasizes the initiating love of God. Jesus starts at the very beginning: creation.

Jesus expresses God's Fatherhood. When his parents found him in the Temple, he said: "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?, Lk 2:49. At the start of His public life, when Jesus was baptized, a voice from heaven said: "Thou art my beloved Son. In thee I am well pleased," Mk 1:11. As he preached to the people, Jesus emphasized: "Behold the birds of the air, for they neither sow, nor do they reap, nor gather into barns, and your heavenly Father feeds them," and on a bit: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They labor not, neither do they spin. But I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed as one of these. And if the grass of the field, which is today, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, God so clothes, how much more you?...For your Father knows that you have need of all these things," Mt 6:26. And His last words were: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," Lk 23:46.

Therese loved the Prodigal Son parable. It shows the Father's tender love for his son who rejected Him, took all he could get from him, and wasted it. That's describes us well. But God welcomed back his beloved son, not because his son deserved it, but because the Father loves us more than we know. The prodigal had nothing, was starving to death, and wanted to work for his dad as a hired hand. But our Father took him back tenderly, with infinite love. Jesus teaches us of the Father's love, but also lives it out in His service during three years, and his passion and death to save us all. Having lived out his loving mercy, showed us the Father's loving mercy, Jesus conquers death, and redeems all sinners.

This achievement is more than many people can bear. But Jesus stretches us even further. He tells us that He and the Father are one in loving us. "Amen, amen I say to you, the Son cannot do anything of himself, but what he sees the Father doing. For what things He does, these the Son also does. ... I cannot of myself do anything. As I hear, so I judge. And my judgment is just, because I do not my own will but the will of Him Who sent me," Jn 5:19-30. We see Jesus serenely doing what the Father does, united with Him entirely. This is the union that we seek to establish. By prayer, and practicing love of people, we imitate Christ, and get ever closer to Him Who is one with the Father.

We struggle with this unity because all the creatures we see are hopelessly isolated from each other. But the Father and the Son are one in ways that no creatures can be. Yet the Father invites us to increasing unity with the Father and Son. Jesus refers to this unity, and the simplicity of His choice to be one with the Father in Jn 13:1-3: "Jesus, knowing that His hour was come, when he would pass out of this world to the Father...knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He came from God and was going to God, rose from supper." This is the start of the Passion. This is the transformation of the Passover meal into its fullness. God wills to give Himself ever more lovingly to us, and is about to show: "greater love than this no man has than to give his life for his beloved." "Therefore does the Father love me because I lay down my life," Jn 10:17. "The chalice that my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?, Jn 18:11. At the end of this new Pascal sacrifice, the first Eucharist, Jesus tells why it's all happening: "That the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father has given me commandment, so I do. Arise, let us go," Jn 14:31.

So Jesus says: "I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again I leave the world, and go the Father," Jn 16:28. On the cross Jesus prays: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do," Lk 23:34. And his last words: "Father into your hands I commend my spirit," Jn 20:17. This shows that God was His Father, the one who cares for Him. Thus Jesus is the great example of how we should be. Therese absorbed this profound lesson: as our perfect Father, God cares for us infinitely well. So we can relax, and be utterly serene.

But we suffer, and ultimately die. How can our Father take care of us if we are starving, attacked, maimed, and finally dead? All these troubles are very clear to Therese. Remember, she suffered three years, and died of tuberculosis at 24. So she had first hand experience of harm. She simply rejoiced to have a few little pains to suffer, compared to the great suffering Jesus bore for us. She agreed with St. Paul that we help fill out the suffering of Jesus. After all, Jesus did not have TB. But His love, suffering the passion and death on the cross, united Him with the Father. So her suffering had the same effect. Therese united with God the Father by doing His will to suffer TB. It is all so clear to Therese that she can express it simply: "My little way is the way of trust and absolute self-surrender," 19.

Instead of giving her reasons for trust in the Father, she concludes directly. If we are little, we know that direct conclusions are OK. By all those direct Scripture quotes, we see that Jesus related us directly to the Father. Therese does it to. It's that simple. If we doubt the Father's merciful love, review what Jesus did. His death released us from sin. He rose from the dead, and told Mary Magdalen: "Go to my brethren, and say to them: I ascend to my Father and to your Father, to my God and to your God," Jn 20:17. From the beginning, through His life, at His death, and after His resurrection, Jesus taught us to live in the Father's merciful love. Therese did that, and thus reminded us of God's Fatherhood.